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ABSTRACT

This paper deals with the vocabulary problems encountered by advanced ESL students. While beginning and intermediate texts tend to control vocabulary and adapt reading selections to the learner, advanced students are usually forced to confront unabridged texts. Reading is a way to increase vocabulary, but a lack of vocabulary makes the reading task difficult. Continual reliance on a dictionary slows the process down and diverts from the over-all meaning of a given passage. It is suggested that strategies should be developed for guessing the meaning of words from the context. Guessing is a natural process in language behavior which the student probably uses in speaking his own language, and can be used in language instruction by means of the cloze procedure. A text in which words have been systematically deleted is presented, requiring the student to use lexical, syntactic, stylistic or contextual clues to replace them. Such exercises are easy to construct. They also provide variety, encourage the student to take risks, and counteract the tendency to deal with words or sentences in isolation. (CLK)

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CLOZE PROCEDURE: A TECHNIQUE FOR WEANING ADVANCED
ESL STUDENTS FROM EXCESSIVE USE OF THE DICTIONARY

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One of the most vexing problems for advanced learners of English as a second language, especially those attempting college-level reading, is vocabulary. Eskey (1973) claims that "for advanced foreign students, vocabulary is crucial." Harris (1966) has pointed out that a child who is a native speaker of English begins first grade with a vocabulary of approximately 25,000 words and adds another 5,000 words for every year spent in school, thus entering college with a recognition vocabulary of over 80,000 words. In contrast, the foreign student coming to study at a college or university in the United States, even though fluent and literate in his own language, may have an English vocabulary of only several thousand words--to say nothing of other problems he has with the language in the areas of pronunciation, listening comprehension, syntax, writing, etc. As a result of his limited vocabulary, a large portion of the words he encounters on any given page of text may be new to him, and he will be at a great disadvantage when he tries to do his assignments.

ESL students themselves are aware of the problem they have with vocabulary (Yorio, 1971); in fact, they sometimes think it is the only problem they have. As a teacher, the most frequent question I have been asked by newly-arrived foreign students is, "How can I increase my vocabulary?" It is a serious question, and one not easy to answer. Certainly exposure to the language through reading is one way to increase vocabulary. But at the same time it is lack of vocabulary that makes reading a problem.

Beginning and intermediate level ESL reading textbooks (e.g., Croft, 1960; Pimsleur & Berger, 1974) deal with the problem by controlling vocabulary and adapting selections to the level of the learner. With only a relatively small number of new words introduced on each page, in a controlled and systematic manner, the student is not overwhelmed by the amount of new material he has to master and, hopefully, can concentrate on building his speed and comprehension. Adapted texts thus help the learner to develop confidence in his ability to read English, and at the same time increase his vocabulary by learning new words in context.

If there were all the time in the world, things might go on like this indefinitely--new words introduced a few at a time, texts carefully graded to match the level of the learner. However, most foreign students do not want to spend more than a couple of semesters in special English classes before going on to take other subjects, and in fact they are often enrolled in other courses concurrently with their work in English. Sooner or later, therefore, they come up against unabridged texts (if not in their English class, then in other subject areas) in which new words are not introduced a few at a time but may instead seem to be everywhere. What will the students do when they face this situation?

In my experience, the typical response of a foreign student faced with an alarming number of new vocabulary items is (if he doesn't give up altogether) to reach for his dictionary--and all too often a bilingual dictionary at that. This unfortunately results in two problems: First, he slows himself down tremendously, and second, he spends so much time on individual words that he loses sight of the over-all meaning of the sentence, or passage, he is reading.

No one is denying the value of dictionaries, and in fact, I would argue that ease in using the dictionary is one of several skills that a student needs to acquire for success in mastering the language at this level. But excessive use of, and dependence on, the dictionary will hinder, not help, the student as he attempts to read with understanding. Used for looking up every new word, the dictionary becomes an impediment, not an aid, to comprehension.

It is often difficult to convince students of this fact, however. They know they are wasting too much valuable time when they stop to look up every word, but they have trouble believing that they will read better, and understand more, if they don't. Indeed, even common sense seems to support them on this point: How can one understand a passage better when he doesn't know the meaning of a word than when he does? Of course, the answer is that the dictionary is not the only way to discover the meanings of new words, and to learn to read successfully, in English as in any other language, whether foreign student or native speaker, one must develop strategies for guessing the meanings of words from the contexts in which they appear. Above all, as Goodman (1974) has remarked, one must be willing to take risks.

Actually, predicting (guessing) what is likely to happen in the flow of discourse from one's knowledge of the language and the evidence of what has happened already, plus the risk-taking such prediction entails, are natural processes in language behavior. Oller (1973) calls it a "grammar of expectancy" and argues that it is present in every observable aspect of language usage. The element of expectancy can be shown to affect not only the visual processing of language, but auditory processing and speaking as well." Thus it is a strategy which the student already knows and employs, certainly in his native language, and hopefully in English as well.

I have often observed foreign students following a difficult lecture with comprehension, and of course without interrupting the speaker to ask him for the meaning of his words. The student, whether he knows it or not, is already employing his knowledge of the grammar of expectancy to guess from context the meaning of the words he doesn't know, and thus follow the thread of meaning through the lecture. Such a student needs only to be shown that the same strategy can be employed in reading, and he will be on his way. Unfortunately, however, I have seen other students thumbing frantically through their dictionaries while the speaker talks on, and they of course lose the thread completely. These are the students, the non-guessers, the non-risk-takers, who need to be shown that their guesses can be informed ones, and that the knowledge they already have of the language and how it works can be relied upon to help them learn it further.

One method that can be used to develop students' willingness to guess is cloze procedure, "a simple technique whereby students are presented with a text from which words have been systematically deleted, and asked to replace the missing words on the basis of any relevant clues (lexical, syntactic, stylistic, or contextual)" (Eskey, 1973). Since the student is presented with a blank space instead of a word, he can't reach automatically for his dictionary, and he must

rely on other means, including his own inner resources, for arriving at meaning. If he is successful in doing this--and it is the teacher's responsibility to construct exercises that will ensure that he is--then he can be led to see that he can do the same thing when he comes to a word he doesn't know in the course of his reading. Once he becomes aware of the strategy, and develops confidence in his ability to use it, he ought to be able to employ it anywhere.

Exercises employing cloze procedure have a number of advantages, which I will note briefly. (See Oller, 1973; Eskey, 1973.)

- (1) They are easy to construct, since they involve merely the deletion of words from an already composed text.
- (2) They can be varied a great deal. One can delete words randomly (every nth word), or delete only specific kinds of words (e.g. function words) for a particular emphasis.
- (3) They encourage the timid student to take risks, to use his knowledge of the language to make informed guesses, to develop confidence in his own resources.
- (4) They seem more like games or puzzles than most language-learning exercises, and students enjoy doing them.
- (5) They involve working with larger units of discourse, thus counter-acting the tendency present in so much ESL instruction to deal with words or sentences in isolation.

In conclusion, a concentrated exposure to cloze procedure, while it won't solve all the student's reading problems, will certainly help him to read for longer stretches without stopping to look up words in his dictionary. As a result, the student will be able to read faster and with greater comprehension, and will not be at such a loss trying to keep up with his American classmates.

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